



Tails for You

a publication of Can Do Canines®

Team 900 has
you to thank



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Photo credit: Kim Kosmatka

Pierce stays on high alert for lows

“I’m full of rare stuff,” says Crystal Gail. First came her rare brain disease in 2008, intracranial hypertension, with symptoms that mimic a brain tumor. Then, in 2021, she stumbled upon reactive hypoglycemia.

As a professional backpacker paid to write about the regions she explores, Crystal Gail was traversing the Arizona Trail when she began describing the map backward to her fellow travelers and exhibiting other odd behaviors. Doctors eventually diagnosed her with a condition that leaves her blood sugar constantly low. She explains that it’s like having Type 1 diabetes without the highs.



Crystal Gail and Pierce are able to shop together for hiking supplies.

When her blood sugar drops below its typical level of 70, she says, “It just keeps going down, and it happens really, really quickly.” The crash can leave her dizzy, sweaty, confused, jittery, or even unconscious. She recalls friends stopping by, saying they couldn’t reach her by phone, but she hadn’t even realized she had blacked out.

Commence Googling. Crystal Gail found Can Do Canines online and recently began her adventure with Diabetes Assist Dog Pierce, making them our organization’s 900th team. Within the first hour of

training with Pierce, Crystal Gail knew her life was about to change ... because her blood sugar began to change. She describes Pierce’s reaction as, “Wait, I know that smell. I notice something wrong with you.” She responded to his alert with, “Oh, is that what you do? Because I like that.”

And alert, he does! Pierce’s help is needed after every time Crystal Gail eats. Although she knows a decline is coming, she can’t predict the timing and be proactive. Luckily, her monitor, in the form of a yellow Lab, is always aware of her sugar levels. “Pierce detects it at 69.” She then restores her sugar level with either juice or milk that has cornstarch in it but explains that it’s always a balance of the right amount at exactly the right time. “Because he’s able to catch it so fast, the likelihood of me having the symptoms like what I experienced prior to getting him is no longer. He catches it sooner than I can, which feels really good. But then it also kind of feels weird because I don’t even know that about my body. I don’t even feel it until it’s too late, but he senses it.”

Pierce can also get juice for her, snag a medical bag, or press a button in her room to call a fellow staff member at the boarding school where she works to come and assist her. Admittedly, he tries to work the system at times, bringing her everything in her room she might want in the hopes of getting rewarded for his efforts. She shakes her head at his attempts. “I’m like, ‘Bro, stop it. Like, just chill.’”

Also a bit “chilled” these days is Crystal Gail’s writing/backpacking career. Her diagnosis prompted her to accept employment at a K-12 school, where Pierce lives with her on campus. She continues doing freelance writing, and she and Pierce take multiple long walks every day. “We’re still building up to where we’ll be hiking partners,” she says, explaining that Pierce is still comparing some outdoor smells to those he detects from her. Yet, she asserts, “We’re definitely going to go on a backpacking trip. I have 600 miles to finish on the Pacific Crest Trail. I don’t know that we can do the 600 miles this summer. We might be able to do three and then three next year, but I intend to finish that.”

This duo will likely embark on plenty of upcoming

expeditions. “With Pierce, I can do the things I love and do them in the way that I love,” she says. “When you have friends and family who are like, ‘We worry about you,’ then that puts additional stress on you.” Pierce eases those concerns.

Crystal Gail is “most grateful for peace of mind and a greater sense of independence and less reliance on others.” However, she declined to express gratitude for Can Do Canines volunteers and supporters through

this article ... for good reason. As a writer herself, she says, “That’s my one gift that I want to give, and I want that one thing to come from me as a person.” So, she has written a thank-you letter for you to read online at can-do.link/CG-Letter.

Now, as she experiences a rare “high”—that of having Pierce—she is clearly sincere when saying, “I’m really happy to have this guy.”

Packs are picked

A slogan we often use to appeal to potential volunteers is “Join our pack.” Joining a pack has taken on an additional meaning, since we started forming small-group packs among volunteers last summer.

“Community engagement is important in an organization with many volunteers to keep people invested,” says Training Manager Shenna Lemche. That’s why Shenna and her team began test piloting the concept of grouping dog hosting volunteers by residential area. They selected one especially experienced volunteer to serve as a pack leader for each of approximately 20 groups of about 5-10 people.



Photo credit: Barbara Steenberg

This pack enjoyed an outing at a local Cabela’s.

The packs are stepping up to the challenge. Since they live near each other and know what’s available in their area, they are coordinating outings (training opportunities, not play dates) that have been very successful. Whether it’s by going to Canvas Convergence, an air show, or other events, Shenna reports, “Packs are being creative and thinking of outing experiences we wouldn’t have even known about.”

Shenna explains, “Our dogs need to learn to work around other dogs and people outside of Can Do Canines. This is the number one issue we deal with and a major reason for career changing dogs. We are hopeful that pack training opportunities will reduce this as an issue.”

Along with scheduling outings, pack leaders follow up with members who have had to turn in a dog to lend emotional support, welcome new members, offer advice when something isn’t going well with a dog, and celebrate when things are. Packs can also be resources for making supply runs, transport help, or finding the right form on the portal.



Photo credit: Lisa Baker

Two of the volunteers who took their dogs in training to Canvas Convergence say “Cheers” to packs!

Shenna says, “I’m really impressed with how they have owned their groups and have taken on a lot of planning and communicating and have stuck to the goals for the dogs. They are doing an awesome job!”

Over these past couple of months, our Puppy Program has been expanding so all dog hosts should have received an invitation to join a pack. If you host dogs and are not yet part of a pack, you can email puppyprogram@candocanines.org to get placed in one near you.

Facility Dog Program becomes official

At the January board meeting, our Board of Directors voted unanimously to make our Facility Dog pilot program permanent.

A Facility Dog is trained to work at a designated location with a variety of people. Typically, this type of dog is placed in a hospital or with a community service provider. Like our other dogs, Facility Dogs are task-trained, but the tasks they perform are done for someone other than their handler.

We have placed several certified dogs in facilities over the years, most notably four in each of the last two years, as we explored this approach. We will limit the number of Facility Dogs we place each year as we continue to keep our emphasis on placing dogs with individual clients, but this is an exciting new way for our dogs to help people and change lives.

Although it might take us a while to update our materials (and our conversations) to reflect that we train six different types of assistant dogs now, we are thrilled to officially add this program to our offerings.



Photo credit: Star Studio

Facility Dog Riggs helps young patients stay active while they are in the hospital.



Photo credit: Colton Kemp, Faribault Daily News

Dyan hands off Penny to the two inmates who will care for her.

Faribault prison partnership resumes

On March 14, Can Do Canines transported two assistance dogs in training, Crombie and Penny, to their temporary home at the Faribault Correctional Facility (FCF). These dogs hadn't chewed on shoes or stolen food off the counter, but were going there for good behavior—to learn even more good behavior from the inmates who will live with and train them for the next few months.

This day held special meaning because it marked a restart with FCF after an eight-year hiatus. This facility was our first prison partner in 2005. For 11 years, dozens of assistance dogs passed through this program. Director of Training Julianne Larsen says, "We're excited to be resuming this partnership with Faribault. The exceptional care and training our dogs get in prison sets them up for the success they will bring to their clients."

FCF is Can Do Canines' eighth prison partner throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. We are hopeful for additional prison partnerships in the future as well.

Celebrating 35 years

This year marks the 35th year that Can Do Canines has been making amazing partnerships with assistance dogs and those who need them. That's 245 in dog years! Along the way, we have grown in important and interesting ways. Here are a few fun facts related to our history.

- We've had four different organization names: The Companion Dog Connection, The Hearing Dog Program of Minnesota, Hearing and Service Dogs of Minnesota, and Can Do Canines (announced in 2009).
- The order in which we have established our different assistance dogs programs is Hearing, Mobility, Seizure, Diabetes, Autism, and Facility.
- We've officed out of five different locations, having moved into our current New Hope building in 2010.
- Including owner-provided dogs, we've certified at least 60 different dog breeds over the years.
- It took five years to go from certifying our 100th team (in 2001) to our 200th team (in 2006). Now, it takes about two years to certify 100 teams.
- We hired our first full-time employee in 1995. We now have 35 full-time positions.

Upcoming Events

More information on our website: candocanines.org/events



Volunteer Emma Hilby and Can Do Canine Lucy demonstrate a skill they've practiced.

Open House, May 18

If you or someone you know might want to learn more about us, check out our open house being held at our New Hope campus on Saturday, May 18, from noon-2 p.m.



Shown here are some of our 2023 race team members.

Twin Cities 10-Mile Race, October 6

Can Do Canines is an official charity partner of the Twin Cities 10-Mile Race. We have about 20 spots on our race team and would love for you to join us! If you want to be on the team, please complete this form: can-do.link/RUN. In addition to the 10-mile race fee, we ask that you commit to fundraising at least \$300.



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HEY, WHERE'S THE ENVELOPE?

Yes, your newsletter is coming to you in a different way this time. We've decided to skip putting this in an envelope to:

- Save trees (less paper)
- Save money
- Save you time (of not having to remove this from an envelope!)

We've still found a nifty way to include a donation envelope. Although it's smaller, the envelope can still hold the same size of donation! We love to receive proof that something in a newsletter resonated with you regarding our mission.



Can Do Canines is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for people with disabilities by creating mutually beneficial partnerships with specially trained dogs.

